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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 HAVANA 000494

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SUBJECT: THE EXIT PERMIT: HAMMER, CARROT, AND RALLYING CRY

REF: A. 06 HAVANA 21638

[1](#)B. 08 HAVANA 66

[1](#)C. 07 BRATISLAVA 211

[1](#)D. 06 HAVANA 23546

[1](#)E. 07 HAVANA 210

[1](#)F. 07 HAVANA 53

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Classified By: COM Jonathan Farrar for reason 1.4 (d)

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Edgard Lopez Moreno, a well-known Cuban youth opposition leader, departed Havana for Miami on August 6, 2009 as a refugee. He quit the island eight days after GOC immigration authorities gave him his exit permit and passport, and two and a half years after he first applied for permission to leave. Lopez's long struggle to obtain an exit permit demonstrates how the Government of Cuba ("GOC") systematically strives to break the will of opposition leaders. His flight signifies both a victory for him and his family, who await him in the United States, as well as a loss for the Cuban opposition, which will be deprived of one of its youngest and most creative leaders at a time when opposition organization is weak at best, and youth are overwhelmingly apathetic. The broad support he received in his fight for an exit permit also illuminated how the right to freedom of movement has emerged as a rallying point for traditional and non-traditional Cuban dissidents, an important point to bear in mind as we pursue migration talks and other human rights issues with the GOC.

[1](#)2. (C) This cable attempts to contextualize Lopez's departure, and in doing so, illuminate how the GOC so effectively uses psychological warfare as a tool in its battle against any political opposition. This cable includes Lopez's personal thoughts about the Cuban opposition, which he shared with us in a final interview, as well as descriptions of his recent mental and emotional state (please protect strictly).

THE EMERGENCE OF A YOUTH LEADER AND KEY USINT CONTACT

¶3. (C) After the "Black Spring" of 2003 saw 75 Cuban dissidents imprisoned for their opposition work, Edgard Lopez Moreno emerged as a youthful, dynamic opposition leader. (Note: Lopez is currently 32 years old. End note.) According to Lopez, the upheaval the "Black Spring" caused in traditional opposition structures resulted in a wider political space for Cuban youth to construct new opposition groups, and allowed him to emerge as a leader. Lopez co-founded the Marti Youth Coalition ("Coalicion Juvenil Martiana" or CJM) in March, 2005 with opposition leaders Marco de Miranda and Yuri Perez Vasquez. (Note: Marco de Miranda departed Cuba for Miami as a refugee in June, 2006. End note.) The CJM's stated goal was "to promote a space for alternative (civic) participation." (REF A) Between 2005 and 2009, Lopez served as vice-president and then president of the CJM. He encouraged a fresh approach to pro-democracy advocacy and facilitated USINT outreach to opposition youth.

¶4. (C) His efforts included:

- launching "Despierta Juventud" ("Awakened Youth" or "Enlightened Youth"), a newsletter which cataloged the CJM's activities;
- creating a contest urging Cubans and foreigners to write letters to political prisoners;
- surveying Cuban youth regarding their work, education, and access to information;
- drafting a "Cuban version" of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, inserting "All Cubans" in front of every article in order to emphasize to dubious Cubans that the UNHCR also applied to them;

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- founding an independent library, based out of his home;
- appearing with other Cuban youth leaders on "A Mano Limpia," a Miami television show, at least twice (with the assistance of USINT);
- publishing GOC violations of human and civil rights;
- participating in USINT tele-conferences and video conferences, including a video conference with former Commerce Secretary Gutierrez (REF B), and a video conference with Slovak dissidents from the 1989 Velvet Revolution (REF C);
- helping USINT to organize an "unprecedented opposition youth forum" in November, 2006, that brought together "sixty-three young pro-democracy activists from three of Cuba's most influential opposition youth groups," with two young Mexican pro-democracy activists (REF D);
- helping USINT to organize an opposition art show in March, 2007 that featured paintings and other works of art emphasizing freedom of expression (REF E);
- participating in and graduating from a USINT/Florida International University course on independent journalism.

¶5. (C) As a result of his consistent, open opposition to the regime, Lopez was harassed, threatened and detained by state security officials, who would insinuate that he, his family, and his colleagues in the opposition could be "disappeared" or killed with impunity at any moment. He was subject to multiple state-sponsored "actos de repudio," including a 2006 demonstration in front of his apartment, where over 100 people chanted pro-regime slogans and screamed offensive terms at his family for forty-five minutes. He was also prohibited from leaving Cuba.

HOW TO BREAK THE OPPOSITION: EXIT PERMIT AS HAMMER

¶6. (C) The United States granted Lopez refugee status in February, 2007. Shortly thereafter, he married fellow

dissident Rufina Velasquez Gonzalez, who received status after being incorporated into Lopez's application. Lopez applied for an exit permit (or "tarjeta blanca") in early 2007. Several times a year, Lopez would answer summons by the Department of Immigration ("Immigration"), only to be told his exit permit was still "in process," because the Ministry of the Interior (state security) had forbidden its issuance due to his "counter-revolutionary" activities. Lopez told us that he had lost track of how many times Immigration had summoned him in order to remind him that he was still prohibited from leaving. Throughout this process, state security harassed and detained Lopez for his opposition work.

17. (C) Once Lopez's wife was granted refugee status under his claim, she also applied for her exit permit. The GOC authorized her departure, while continuing to stonewall Lopez's permit. (Note: Velasquez's parents are also Cuban dissidents; her father is a political prisoner and her mother is currently gravely ill with cancer. End note.) Post noted the severe emotional and mental strain this decision created for both Lopez and Velasquez, but in June, 2008) with her husband's support - Rufina Velasquez emigrated to Miami. Her departure left Lopez with little family in Cuba; his mother, brothers and wife were all in Miami. In December, 2008, state security officials finally told Lopez he was "free." Immigration authorities, however, denied that state security had authorized his exit permit. State security officials then told Lopez there must be a bureaucratic delay at Immigration, and that he would have to continue to wait.

HOW TO STRENGTHEN THE OPPOSITION: EXIT PERMIT AS RALLYING CRY

18. (C) On April 15, 2009, Lopez began a hunger strike to protest the continuing "denial" of his exit permit. His strike, coming on the heels of another highly publicized hunger strike by dissident Jorge Luis Garcia Perez ("Antunez"), garnered broad support on- and off-island. Lopez

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used a blog to gather electronic signatures in support of his exit permit (over ninety) and also collected local signatures (over forty). He received phone calls from news outlets in Miami as well as Amnesty International, which eventually posted an Urgent Action Alert detailing his case and appealing for letters to be sent to the GOC.

19. (C) By April 18, state security had blocked off Lopez's street and had detained at least a dozen supporters who tried to visit his home. On April 25, state security officers visited Lopez and "suggested" that he would have his exit permit in "a few months, maybe two to three" if he would drop his hunger strike and "stay quiet." They claimed they could not arrange for his permit any sooner, because it might appear that Lopez had "forced" the GOC's hand. Lopez told us that he refused the bribe because he had "no faith in their promises." On April 28, Lopez presented a formal demand and his signed petitions to the Department of Immigration. Immigration officials told Lopez they would respond to his petition within "sixty working days." When Lopez presented his demand, he was joined by a surprisingly broad swath of non-traditional Cuban dissidents, including Yoani Sanchez of the blog Generacion Y, as well as musician Ciro Garcia of the Cuban punk band Porno para Ricardo. Sanchez blogged that day about Lopez's struggle, linking it to her own notorious fight for an exit permit. She also detailed state security's "suggestion" to Lopez and Immigration officials' response to his demands.

110. (C) Lopez quietly ended his hunger strike after presenting his demands, but told us he would begin again if the GOC did not respond in the promised time period. On July 14, the United States raised the issue of exit permits with the GOC at the U.S.-Cuba Migration Talks. On July 16,

immigration officials summoned Lopez and, with a state security officer present, informed him that his exit permit had been approved, and that he should depart Cuba as quickly as possible. When Lopez asked if he would be allowed to return to Cuba, the state security officer answered, "That depends on how you behave off the island." Lopez picked up his permit on July 28. He departed for Miami on August 6, two and a half years after he had been granted refugee status.

HOW TO BREAK THE OPPOSITION: EXIT PERMIT AS CARROT

¶11. (C) Although Lopez remained president of the CJM until his departure, the organization's reach and impact has fallen off steadily over the past year. In 2007, Lopez believed that he and other youth leaders might be able to unite 300 youth activists for a nationwide youth forum (REF F). In 2009, the CJM's most notable activity was supporting and publicizing Lopez's struggle to leave Cuba.

¶12. (C) The GOC routinely divides opposition families by issuing one spouse (and/or children) an exit permit while withholding another spouse's permit. This strategy was highly effective in Lopez's case. Post noted Lopez's growing depression and desperation after his wife's departure in mid-2008. In his interviews with us throughout 2009, Lopez shifted from detailing opposition activities to detailing personal problems and his strategy to obtain an exit permit. He increasingly used limited USINT internet time to instant message with his wife and correspond with family and friends off-island. Lopez acknowledged in meetings with us that he was feeling overwhelmed by the psychological strain of being trapped on the island by the GOC, and separated from his family and wife in the United States. He viewed the denial of his exit permit as deliberate "psychological torture" by the GOC.

¶13. (C) Other youth leaders, who had previously been his closest colleagues, noted in interviews with us that Lopez had "checked out," and that he was "finished with the fight." His focus on leaving the island demoralized other youth leaders and occasionally bred resentment. One particularly active contact told us, "(Lopez) publicizes events as if the

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CJM were still this active organization, and then when he can't get anyone to come, he calls me in a panic and asks me to bring my people...(he) was a tremendous opposition leader. Tremendous! But now his heart and his head are in Miami, and once he gets there, he'll never look back."

¶14. (C) Although Lopez maintained that he had rejected state security's request to drop his hunger strike and "stay quiet," he did end his strike three days after their visit, and he substantially diminished his profile within the opposition after April. His exit permit was issued July 24, 62 working days after he presented his petition at Immigration and "a few months" after his state security visit. (Note: The vice-president of the CJM, Yuri Perez Vasquez, had doggedly attempted to file a complaint with UNESCO regarding Cuba's educational system; he also appeared to drop that complaint in April. He informed us in June that the GOC had finally issued his exit permit after a long delay, and that he would be departing for Miami as a refugee sometime in the fall. End note.)

COMMENTS

¶15. (C) It is impossible to divine why the GOC granted Lopez his exit permit after two and a half years. With publicity from blogs and the support of Amnesty International, Lopez's

hunger strike might have increased the political cost of a continuing denial. State security officers might have felt that Lopez was adequately "broken," or that the CJM was no longer any kind of threat. His close relationship to USINT might have given the GOC reason to retain his exit permit as a card that could be played during migration talks. Alternatively, Lopez may be benefiting from a new GOC strategy regarding exit permits. He is not the only notable dissident to receive an exit permit recently: the vice-president of the CJM has also been assured that he will receive a permit, and famed dissident Dr. Hilda Molina was granted an exit permit in June (REF G).

¶16. (C) Though the GOC's reasoning in this case remains murky, Lopez's story does illuminate some common GOC tactics towards the opposition. By cracking down early and hard on emerging opposition leaders, the GOC creates tremendous incentive for leaders to seek refugee status. Once leaders win refugee status, their focus routinely shifts from opposition work in Cuba to dreaming about a new life outside of Cuba. State security then dangles the exit permit as bait, pressuring opposition members to inform on their colleagues, sow dissent within the ranks, (REF H) or lower their profile; alternatively, state security can wield exit permits as a sword, strategically dividing families and psychologically incapacitating those who remain in Cuba.

¶17. (C) Freedom of movement in general has proven to be a rare rallying point for the opposition and an issue that resonates with the general populace. Cubans from multiple areas of civil society will publicly denounce violations of their freedom of movement, which includes not only exit permits but also freedom of movement on-island. Internationally, recent high-profile cases such as Yoani Sanchez, Hilda Molina, and Edgard Lopez have attracted considerable press, and presented the world with a human rights violation the GOC is hard-pressed to defend or to blame on US policies. Both the EU and the US have raised freedom of movement as a key issue in talks with the GOC. Cuban opposition leaders will continue struggling to change Cuba, and many then will choose to leave it. So long as the GOC continues to deny their right to exit, the opposition will retain at least one issue that inspires unity.
FARRAR